

Tuesday, March 29, 2011

The specter of a massive peanut recall three years ago was but a distant shadow for those celebrating in the intermittent sunshine at the Peanut Proud Festival in Blakely, Ga., on Saturday.

"Three years ago we were walking around wondering 'what next?' Now we're looking forward to tomorrow," Early County Producer of the Year Mike Newberry said. Newberry, his wife Sheri and 18-year-old daughter Michaelyn served as grand marshal in the Peanut Proud parade.

Though the skies spit rain occasionally through the day, U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop – known as The Peanut Congressman – says the sun is shining on the industry. Especially when he thinks back to that recall, at the heart of which was The Peanut Corporation of America, headquartered in this charming town.

"Those were dark days," Bishop said. "We have gotten back up by the grace of God. We are, here today in Early County, peanut proud."

The silver lining in the dark cloud of which Bishop spoke is a recognition of the impact peanuts and the surrounding industry have on this corner of the world. Mayor Rick Hall pointed out that the community is most appreciative of Birdsong Peanuts, also headquartered in Blakely. If PCA was the black sheep, then Birdsong is the good shepherd.

And yet, even Birdsong, is but one solid rock in a firm economic foundation. As are the farmers themselves.

"We're only one aspect," Newberry said. "We sometimes forget about all those agribusinesses that get us started and keep us going. ... Small communities need events like this to remind us of how proud we are. It also reminds us of just how important the peanut industry is to this part of the country."

Another aspect – celebrated with gusto – is the industry leaders who call Blakely home.

Raymond Singletary and a couple dozen of his family members celebrated his 99TH birthday at the festival.

Part of the Peanut Proud mission is to recognize excellence, Manry said, which is why the festival particularly recognized Singletary, who operated Singletary Farms, worked for Blakely Peanuts and served on the National Peanut Council and the World Hunger Commission. Manry noted Singletary's accomplishments as both a peanut industry and humanitarian leader.

"He is an icon for our community and our industry," Manry said.

And if all of those things – and a bag of roasted peanuts – wasn't enough. The community also stomped its feet for a farmer's daughter. Joanna Smith – daughter of Tony and Bev Smith – recently signed a recording contract with Columbia Nashville. Smith performed in the afternoon – crooning "Georgia Mud" to a crowd that certainly wasn't stuck in yesterday.

Though she brought back a few memories.

"So many people are proud of Joanna," Newberry said. "I find myself not really surprised. I've been watching her perform in the living room Sunday nights after church since she was knee high.

"Now she's right where she's supposed to be."